

# BREXIT AT LAST WITH NO REGRETS AND NO RETURNING

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What a contrast January 1 this year was with January 31 last year, the day we officially left the European Union but remained practically inside it. Then, banners waved, megaphones blared, and the Brexit struggle continued. The contrast is not due to lockdown alone. This year, there seems to be relief that the battle is over. Though there might in theory have been economic and legal advantages in no deal, the political benefits of an agreement are huge. As the debate in the House of Commons showed, if there are still many who regret Brexit, there is now no significant political force working to reverse it.

Though there are a few prominent anti-Brexiteers who hope one day to rejoin the EU, this requires a remarkable faith in miracles. It would be miraculous if the EU could solve its internal problems – financial, political and social – to a degree that would make rejoining feasible. It is divided between the more prosperous north and the economically blighted south – a gulf created and perpetuated by the euro system itself. It is now also divided between a liberal west and a conservative east. Without Britain, it has to decide how to go forward.

In theory it could rush ahead to further integration, as President Macron wants. Or its divisions could become wider. In either case, it would be less attractive to any but the most millenarian Rejoiner in Britain. The only thing that could make rejoining even conceivable would be an economic catastrophe in the UK. But reputable economic think tanks are now predicting post-Brexit success. If disaster does come, it is more likely to be in the Eurozone.

The most painful aspect of the last four years has been not our ill-tempered wrangling with Messrs Barnier, Juncker, Tusk and Verhofstadt, but our bitter internal quarrel. Painful not because people had different ideas about national welfare – that is the stuff of democratic politics – but because there were some who seemed reconciled to national humiliation and failure. “We will huff and puff but, in the end, we will basically come to heel,” as one noble lord put it.

I am not sure that this degree of national self-abasement exists among the elites of other countries. I can only understand it as a symptom of the declinism that has distorted our view of ourselves and the world for over half a century. It’s a familiar story. We were once a powerful nation, and now we’re not. We were once economically successful, and now we’re not. Our only conceivable future was as a humble member of the EU club. Now we have left it, further decline is inevitable, even deserved, as punishment for the national pride of those populist plebs and their leaders.

Those of us of a certain age were brought up on declinism, and I suspect it has touched us all to some extent. But it is plainly false. Even when Britain had a large empire (which one of its officials rightly called “a brontosaurus with huge vulnerable limbs”), it was not a superpower. For three centuries it has been an overstretched, medium-sized state,

which has surmounted many disasters and trials with reasonable success and sometimes triumph. We are, and have always been, among the world's richer countries, and for 20 years we have been economically outperforming the Eurozone. So where is the decline so dear to some? "The 'Great' will be soon be gone from Britain ... in a few years she will fall to the second or third rank of European powers," wrote a French diplomat – in 1777.

In addition, we have a new kind of national self-abasement, which is particularly afflicting the English-speaking world. It is worse in the USA and I think, too, in Australia. Here, it amounts to a renunciation of the United Kingdom and especially England. The philosopher John Gray has described it as "the woke insurgency ... symbolic actions aiming to sever the present from the past, not policies designed to fashion a different future," and as such essentially sterile.

I feel unsure as to how deep this multifarious culture war goes. It has, of course, been inflamed by the Brexit conflict, which produced hostile stereotypes on both sides and caused real feelings of anger and antagonism. But the debate has been excessively dominated by extreme voices.

There is evidence that the national divide may not be as deep as it sometimes seems. Research suggests that Leavers and Remainers have similar views on most issues. Polling before the referendum showed consistently that very few British people regarded themselves as "European" rather than British. Indeed, a huge majority was broadly Eurosceptic, and most Remainers voted half-heartedly because they had economic worries.

If some extreme Rejoiners are impossible to reconcile – most obviously those political groups that have chained themselves to the EU – the way to broad reconciliation with the new reality is simple, though not easy. We all know what it is: to make Brexit a success by the "levelling up" aspiration of investment, education, training and support for new enterprises. Remainers often asked – with an air of triumph – for "one single thing we gain from Brexit". There are many things: most recently a faster and more efficient programme of vaccination. But the real answer is a reinvigorated democracy.

Few Brexiteers do not, deep down, hope that leaving the EU, a salutary shock to the establishment, will galvanize us as a country. Brexit has turned conservatives into radicals, and self-styled progressives into reactionaries. A similar aspiration to "take back control" is felt across the democratic world. If Brexit is remembered in history, it may be as a successful revolt against that supranational technocracy which has enfeebled democracy around the globe. The Brexit response is clear: to re-empower the democratic nation state, to rely on the solidarity of the nation, and to trust that the age of democracy has not been replaced by a post-democratic age of bureaucracy – whether authoritarian, as in China, or neoliberal, as in the EU.

So is Brexit, as its detractors often say, a "populist" rebellion against reality, a variant of Trumpism? If the sources of discontent are similar, the outcome is hugely different. It's not a rebellion against national institutions ("draining the swamp"), but a reaffirmation of trust that those institutions can and must serve the common interest. At the other end of the spectrum is an elitist and uncritical devotion to a failed utopia. How can this be explained? A scathing diagnosis has been made by the economist Sir Paul Collier: "The well educated metropolitans who have enjoyed rising relative incomes, have gradually

peeled off from shared national identity. The option of being ‘European’ has perhaps been a convenient justification for them to withdraw from obligations to their provincial fellow citizens.”

If Brexit is to bear fruit and be a source of reconciliation rather than division, it must mark the point at which these obligations are once more accepted, not only in words, but in actions.

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